

Inspection report for Oaklands Children's Centre

Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	383533
Inspection dates	8–9 December 2011
Reporting inspector	Christine Davies HMI

Centre leaders	Lloyd Murphy – Headteacher and centre leader Tracey Davis – Children and families coordinator
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Oaklands Infants School and Nursery
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the partner infant and nursery school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with managers, staff, parents and representatives of partner organisations. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including parents' evaluations of the centre's work.

Information about the centre

Oaklands Children's Centre is located in Weedswood to the south of Chatham. The governing body of Oaklands Infant and Nursery School manages the centre on behalf of Medway council and the work is led by the headteacher. Day-to-day work is carried out by a children and families coordinator, outreach worker and an administrator. The centre was designated in 2008 and has fulfilled the full core offer of a phase one children's centre since 2010. An independent advisory body is in place. The centre currently operates from temporary accommodation in the grounds of the school. New premises, with more than double the available space, are being built alongside. The centre works in close partnership with six private and voluntary childcare settings and with childminders in the reach area. Activities take place in space provided by community associations, clinics and schools nearby.

The centre serves a diverse community. A minority of families are relatively affluent, in professional employment and live in private housing. In contrast, most families experience high levels of social and economic disadvantage. The community closest to the school and centre is among the 30% most deprived in the country. Approximately half of all families in the area have low levels of educational skills or training. Many families live in social housing. The main issues facing the area are lone parenthood, low aspirations and low income as a result of part-time or unskilled working. One in three children live in a household supported by workless benefits.

The ethnicity of the population is 95% White British, with no significant minority groups. The majority of children start in the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are below the expectation for their age.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre’s capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

3

Main findings

Oaklands provides satisfactory support to children and their families and is on a path of rapid improvement. With guidance from the local authority in the last two years the centre’s leaders have established purposeful governance and secured an enthusiastic and effective staff team. These changes, after a previous period of relative inactivity towards meeting children’s centre core aims, are beginning to drive improvement. The concerted efforts of leaders, managers and staff have brought a dramatic, five-fold increase in attendance in the last year. Satisfactory numbers of families that the centre would most like to reach in the community are now benefiting.

There are limits to what the centre can offer in the present temporary accommodation. Current use of resources is satisfactory. Essential safeguarding procedures are in place. Plans focus on priority needs of the area and some outcome areas are improving. Skilled teamwork among the small staff group ensures that the environment is safe and that provision for family learning is good. Staff and parents are enthusiastic about the work of the centre and look forward to expansion of services in the new building, for example more in-depth courses with a crèche locally for parents and better health counselling facilities. Specific and detailed plans linked to targets to take advantage of the increased capacity are at an early stage of development.

The role of parents is integral to helping the centre to improve to the level it has achieved recently. Parent volunteers help the staff expand the work of the centre and make it welcoming to all new users. Parents are routinely asked for their views on the timing and location of activities so that those attending feel valued. One parent’s comment that ‘the staff make sure the centre is for all of us, no matter what our background’ is typical of how parents view the welcoming atmosphere.

The centre has had good impact on the personal development and achievement of children and adults who attend. Parents gain confidence in providing a nutritious start to the day and support to their children's reading in 'Breakfast and books' sessions. Children who go on the school's nursery settle in well and make better progress by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage than children who did not attend.

The centre's activities are having a positive influence in helping some families to take up healthy lifestyles and access the health services that they need. Children and families are kept safe in the centre and safeguarding procedures are in place as they should be. Parents, through contact with the centre, are getting the training and advice they need to take steps towards employment or improve their financial security.

The overall direction of improvement is clear. The centre's evaluation of its effectiveness is broadly accurate but over optimistic in a few respects. Particularly in outcomes for health, safety and economic well-being, the centre's analysis relies too much on the positive trend data and does not always measure up against quantifiable targets or look at comparable benchmark information. With the move to more suitable premises and with strong input from the local authority, supportive users and partner organisations, the centre has satisfactory capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With the support of the local authority and all partner agencies, put in place more formal procedures to gather information about children and adults' achievements, including the outcomes for health and economic well-being, to enable the centre to evaluate its effectiveness and focus resources more precisely.
- Plan rigorously to secure consistently good and improving outcomes for users across all aspects of the centre's work as the centre moves into new premises by:
 - providing more continuity in courses for parents
 - using the full range of data and information available, including national and local benchmarks
 - setting ambitious and quantifiable targets, in particular to raise aspirations for more families and attract more families who are facing the greatest deprivation in the area
 - linking the specific indicators that the centre has set for measuring success throughout all levels of planning.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Parents' own evaluations identify the health and emotional well-being of families

using the centre are improving. Parents take up courses in cookery, see their midwives and health visitors and get access to services for specialist services for their children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, such as speech and language therapists, or counselling services for themselves. Regular users are making changes to healthier lifestyles. This contributes to decreasing the level of obesity among six-year-olds in the area and increasing, for example, the numbers of mothers initiating breastfeeding. Despite these improvements, services are slower to impact on the families in the most deprived areas. The health of families overall remains satisfactory when compared to national measures.

Families feel safe and well cared for in the centre. Families in urgent need are helped, either through advice, guidance offered by centre staff or referral on to an agency that can help them. The centre has some success in engaging with families considered to be most at risk. Parents at risk of domestic violence are signposted on to the Freedom programme. Formal Common Assessment Framework procedures and child protection procedures are in place and are set in action in the most pressing cases.

Children attending the centre learn and develop well. Those with identified special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported well as they transfer to school. The centre's activities enrich children's communication and social skills and help develop good attitudes to learning. Data for children going on to the linked infant school show that the children settle in well and their progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage accelerates faster than that of their peers across all areas of their learning.

Parents themselves make a valuable contribution to participation and achievement. A strong band of volunteers give individual support to others who are not so confident about taking part. Parents told inspectors that 'word of mouth' is one of the most important factors in getting new families to come along in their area. They encourage other parents, extended families and carers to give their views and support the work of the centre in the community.

Parents' personal development, knowledge and confidence improve rapidly through attending stay and play, affordable cookery classes, first aid and basic education courses. Family learning, such as 'Breakfast and books' and 'Snacks and story', helps parents greatly in supporting their children's health and learning. All parents can access, and they greatly value, information and advice about employment and benefits for lone parents. Parents take up basic education and information and communication technology (ICT) courses in good numbers, but the location of these courses limits access, which in turn limits an improvement in their chances of qualification and employment.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
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The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

2

The centre's programme of activities is adequately varied and supportive to the community identified as most in need in the interim period before the centre moves to the new premises. Assessments of families' needs are full and detailed when families first register at the centre or are referred. Beyond that, staff monitor families' progress adequately through observation and evaluation. Although their formal recording is minimal, staff get to know the participants well and seek ways to adapt activities to meet individual needs. For example, more activities are provided for fathers.

Learning provision for children and adults is good quality. Staff are skilled, they plan well and parents' views help to make decisions about the content of sessions, such as messy play, and where to hold them. Links with the targeted two-year-old programme and a qualified teacher who advises provision in the private and voluntary sector ensure that children's learning is promoted well. Information is shared and the centre can focus on identified weak areas, such as early reading and writing skills. This is having a good impact for users and the area as a whole.

A caring, inclusive attitude towards families using the centre and those in the area of greatest need underpins the work of the centre. The centre uses partnerships well to identify those in need of support and coordinate outreach to them. A strength of the centre for users is the access to advice and information from staff and other professionals, like midwives, working at the centre who they value as experts in their fields.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The local authority has given the centre's leaders a vital steer in the last two years to help the centre establish and improve services while forging ahead with the building expansion work. Leadership and management are satisfactory with some strong and improving aspects. The advisory board provides effective scrutiny. Management supervision ensures that staff are skilled and provision is good. The views of key partners and parents make a strong contribution to evaluations at all levels. Parents are an increasing part in making major decisions. Data are shared between partners and used effectively to understand the needs of the area. Leaders set clear priorities and plans are linked at all levels, although not in all cases in sufficient detail to focus effort.

The emphasis on inclusion for families with adults or children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is satisfactory. Services are integrated to a satisfactory extent, being extended from direct provision in the limited accommodation through active information, signposting and referral of users to other services. Partnerships are well established to play a large part in delivering specialist health, family support and safeguarding services. All relevant safeguarding procedures are in place for the safe vetting of staff and visitors. Satisfactory procedures keep the main and outreach premises safe. Policies and procedures, adapted from the linked-school policies, are routinely reviewed.

The good quality of the activities is a great achievement by the small team of staff. Day-to-day management is efficient so that the programme is as full as it can be. Value for money is satisfactory as, although the impact on overall attendance is notably good, the use of resources has satisfactory impact on outcomes overall and for the groups in most need. Leaders and managers have satisfactory capacity to deliver more when they move to the new site. When the centre plans in detail what it will do and how it will judge if the work is successful or not it achieves some very good results, for example through 'Breakfast and books'. Planning for continuity and extension of activities is underway, although not all details of targets and success criteria are planned at every level.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

Oaklands Infants and Nursery School was inspected in the same week as the children's centre. It was judged to be a satisfactory school overall with good overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The school's safeguarding policies and procedures from which the centre draws its own, including assessment of risks and tackling hazards in the school environment, are satisfactory.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Oaklands Children's Centre on 8 and 9 December 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

First of all, the inspectors would like to say thank you very much for the time you spent talking to us and showing us the work of the centre. We wish you and your

children every success as you move into the new premises. Here is a short report of what we found.

Many of you told us that there has been a great improvement in how well the centre helps families in the area since a dedicated children and families' coordinator came into post. The range of activities is wider and staff get to know you well.

We are very impressed by the rapid increase in the numbers of families attending, which is about five fold in a year. Some of the families who attend now have not used any early years or children's centre services before and they are feeling the benefits in many aspects of their lives.

Parents told us that all of the centre's friendly staff, outreach worker and administrator included, make you want to spend time at the centre and make sure you know how to get in touch with other services, like health and employment advisers. The view of one parent that 'the staff make sure the centre is all for us, no matter what our background' is typical of how parents view the welcoming atmosphere.

The group of volunteers do a great job to help the staff with parents who are not so confident about taking part. You told us that 'word of mouth' is one of the most important factors in getting new families to come along.

Parents' personal development, knowledge and skills improve rapidly through attending stay and play, cooking, first aid and basic education courses. There is not always local course to go on to make even more progress. You find 'Breakfast and books' and 'Snacks and story' sessions very helpful in supporting your children's health and learning. Children who attend the centre make a good start when they settle into the school nursery.

Leadership and management are satisfactory and have improved strongly in some respects. Procedures are in place to ensure your safety, as they should be. Providing a full programme of good quality activities is a great achievement by the small team of staff. They have listened to your views about what works best. They put your ideas, such as where and when to hold each session, into practice.

We have asked the centre, with support of other organisations and the council, to gather information about children and adults' achievements in the longer run to gain a better understanding of the impact of their work and provide focus. We have highlighted that the centre should include support to your health and finding employment.

There are limits to what the centre can offer in the temporary accommodation, for example to provide more in-depth courses with a crèche locally for parents and better health counselling facilities. We have asked the centre to plan carefully and thoroughly for working in the new premises to help even more people improve aspects of their lives and particularly provide more continuity for adults.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.